

Our
Forest
Our
Right

a Handbook for Adivasi children



This book is brought together by

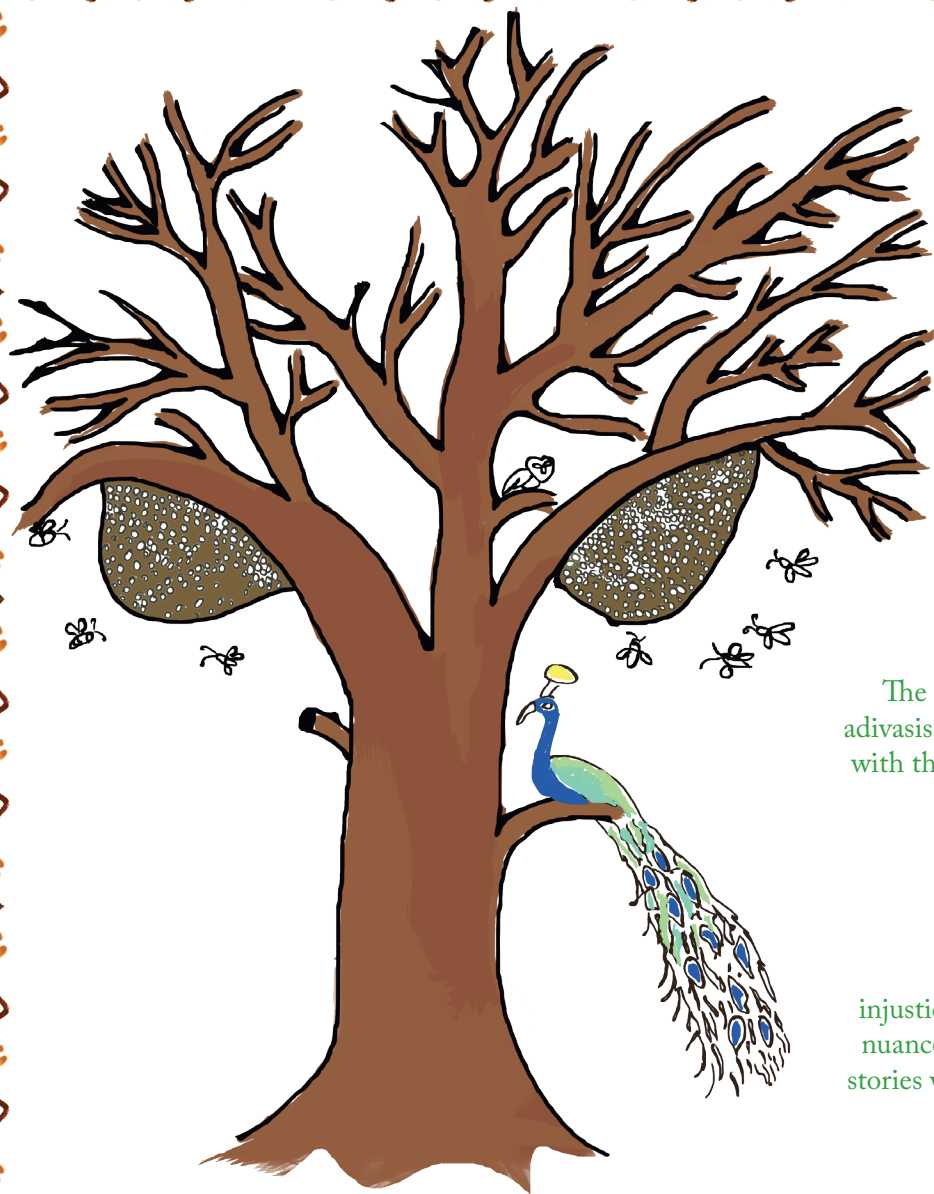
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About the Book

Forests have been the homeland of adivasis for many, many generations. Once upon a time, adivasis lived happily in the forest in harmony with nature. They collected everything they needed from the forest. They had a deep knowledge of their forest and protected it for future use.

All of this started to change when the British arrived. Adivasis were stopped from using the forest freely. Since then, adivasis have been constantly pushed to the edges. Not only were they stripped of their rights, they would be punished for using the forest and sometimes, forcefully evicted. This continued until the Forest Rights Act was passed in 2006.

The Forest Rights Act aims to correct the historic injustice that alienated adivasis from their forests. The Adivasi Munnetra Sangam has been working with the adivasis in the Gudalur valley of Tamil Nadu for their rights in the forest since 2009. Today, the adivasis in Gudalur are asserting their forest rights without fear of the Forest Department.

In this book, we have tried to capture the history of this relationship between the adivasis and the forests in India, from the British to the current era and the potential of the Forest Rights Act to reverse the injustice to adivasis. It is beyond the scope of the book to capture the many nuances of this history. We have tried our best to include the most relevant stories without losing its essence as a children's book. We hope that children everywhere, especially adivasi children, will enjoy these stories.



In this book we have used a few local words to help retain authenticity. If you are a reader from outside Tamil Nadu you may find it helpful to refer to this list:

Noorai: A kind of edible tuber

Manvetti: A large spade-like tool for digging the soil

Thotta vadi: A medicinal plant used for treating skin problems. *Mimosa pudica* is a creeping annual or perennial herb of the pea family also called sleepy plant, humble plant, shameplant, touch-me-not, *chumui* (Hindi and Urdu) and *lajalu* (Marathi).

Ragi: A kind of millet that used to be the staple diet of adivasis in the Nilgiris

Topi: Hat

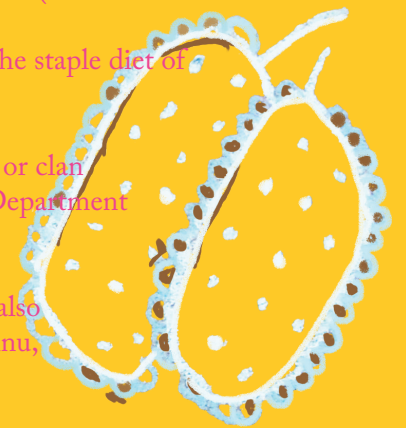
Karnavar: Traditional elder of a village or clan

Tehsildar: Local head of the Revenue Department

Vayat: Paddy field

Nellikai: Gooseberry

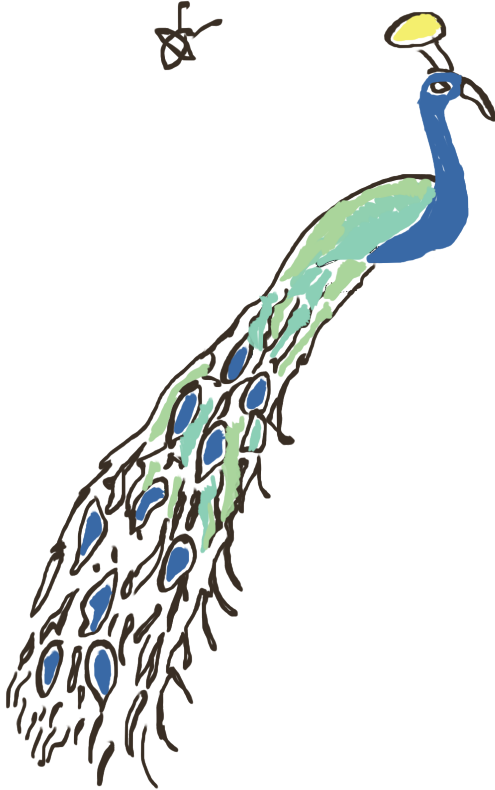
Naaval: A tree with purple-black fruit also called the Jamun, Jambhul, Nerale Hannu, Neredu Pandu, Java Plum etc.



Find the Story



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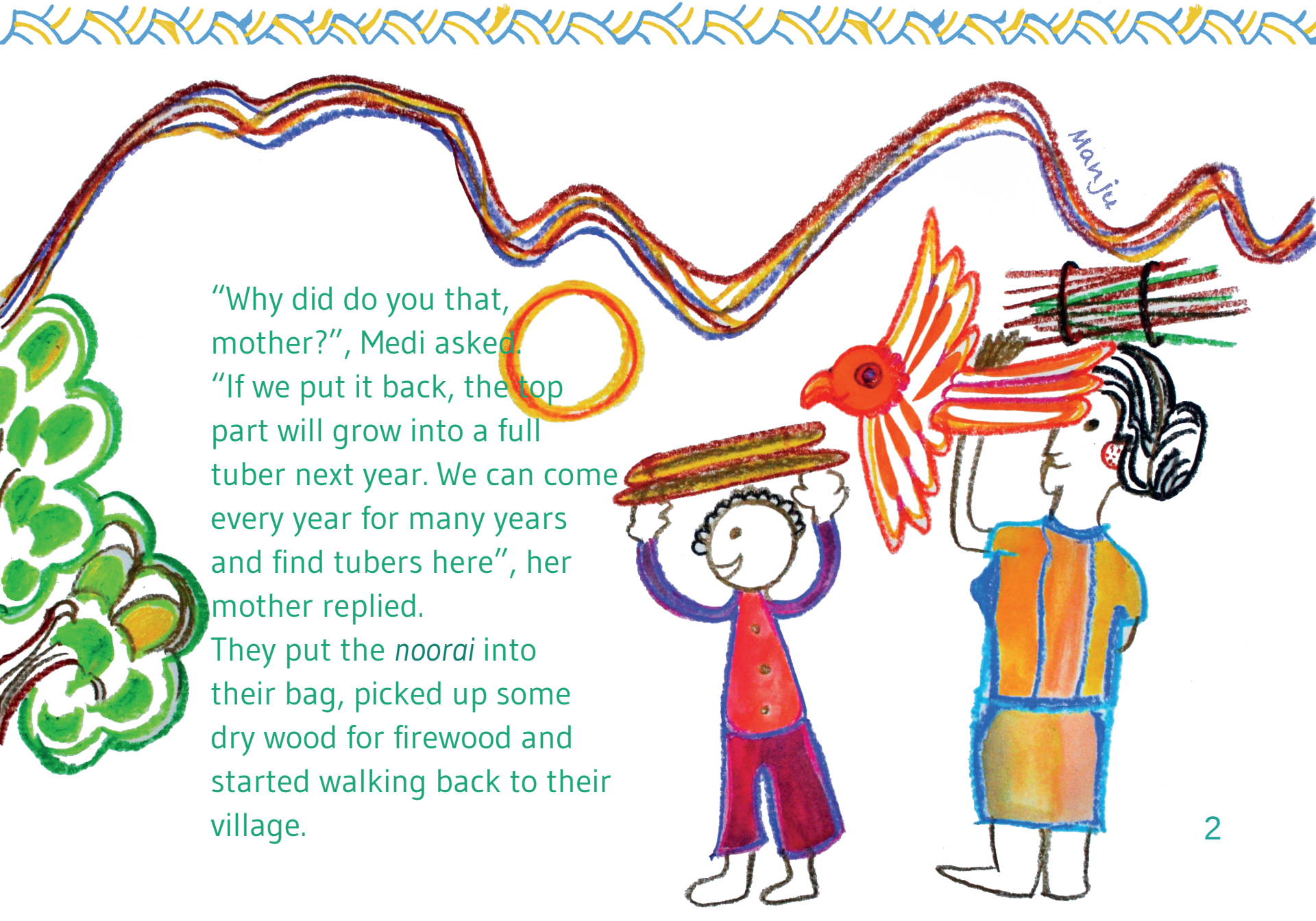


Medi was seven years old. She lived in Vellikolli which was near the forest. She went into the forest with her mother and her older brother, Kethan, to collect firewood and tubers. On her first day in the forest, they had spent

Medi's Day in the Forest

four hours searching for tubers and fruits when her mother noticed some *noorai* plants.

She said, "Look Medi, there are some *noorai* plants here." Her mother took the *manvetti* from Kethan and started digging for the tuber *noorai*. When she took the *noorai* out of the mud, they saw that it was big enough for the whole family. Then her mother cut the lower part of the tuber and put the top part back into the mud.



"Why did do you that, mother?", Medi asked.
"If we put it back, the top part will grow into a full tuber next year. We can come every year for many years and find tubers here", her mother replied.
They put the *noorai* into their bag, picked up some dry wood for firewood and started walking back to their village.



On their way back, Medi's mother picked up the leaf of a plant and said, "Medi, this plant is called *thotta vadi*. The leaves of this plant are very good for skin problems."

"How is it used, mother?"

"You have to boil the leaves in water until the water turns black. After that, you have to take a bath in that water. All your skin problems will go away."

"Can we take some back mother?"

"No, we do not need them. We should take these leaves only when we need them. And we should take only as much as we need."

"Ok, mother".



B. Girija

Question: What are the different things adivasis collected from the forest?



British rule and our Forests

Our gods lived with us in the forest.

The forest was our home. We protected it so that our children and grandchildren could also use it in future.

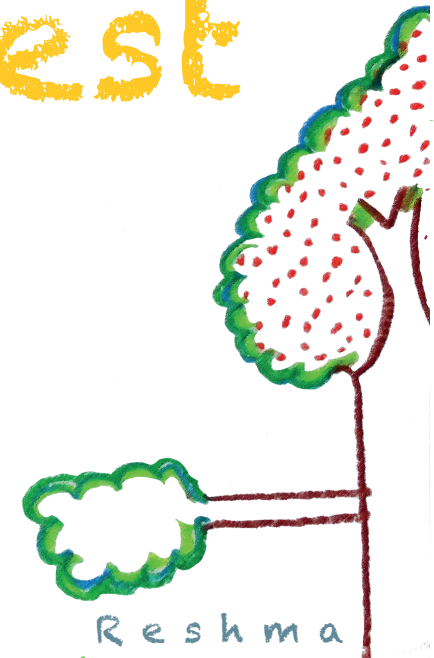
This situation changed during the British rule. At that time, big cities like Bombay and Calcutta were coming up. The government needed large quantities of wood to build railway lines all across the country. Forests were their source of wood. In order to use the forest for wood, the government took control of the forest.

The Forest Department was started around 150 years ago (in the year 1864). They had forest settlement officers, whose main job was to make a list of people living inside forests, and allow them to keep some land on which they lived.

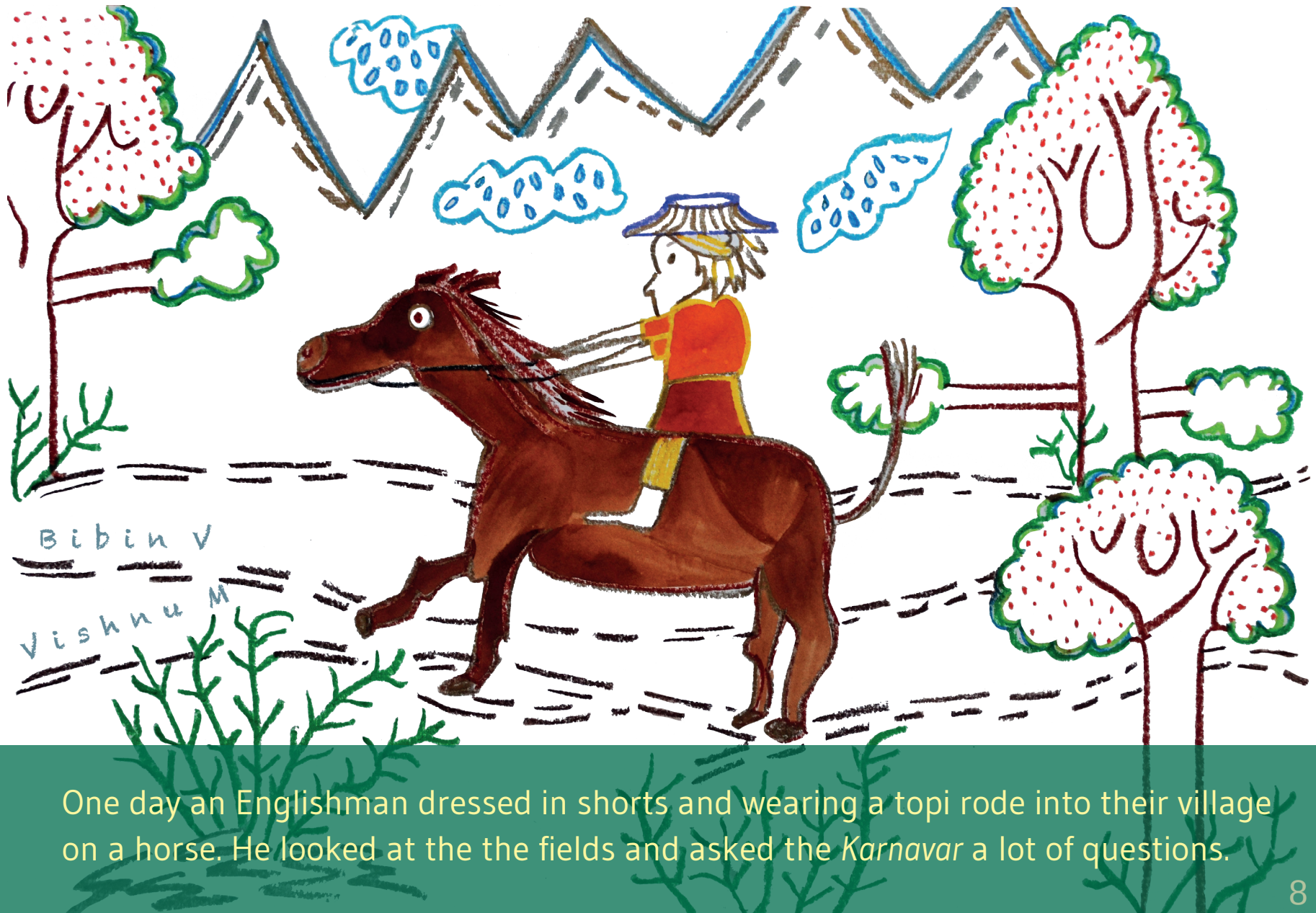


Chathi's Forest

Each year, Chathi's family used to cut a new part of the forest for cultivating *ragi*. They would leave the old *vayal* so that the soil could become healthy again and the forest could grow back. This year the village was planting *ragi* in a different *vayal*.



Reshma



One day an Englishman dressed in shorts and wearing a topi rode into their village on a horse. He looked at the the fields and asked the *Karnavar* a lot of questions.



A few days later, the *tehsildar* and a group of forest officials came to the village. They began measuring each field on the newly planted *vayal*. On getting to Chathi's field they asked him, "Where is your field?" Chathi showed them the area he had cultivated that year.

The inspector measured it and said, "I am registering these twenty cents of land in your name. From now on, do your farming only on this plot of land. Don't cut the forest anywhere else. The rest of the forest belongs to the government."

From that day onwards, Chathi could grow his *ragi* only on the same twenty cents of land. If he grew it anywhere else, he would be in jail.



Forests for the Government



As the demand for wood increased, the British government was worried about the future. If the trees were cut down so rapidly, where would they get the timber to build more railway lines, ships and houses? So they decided to plant new trees.

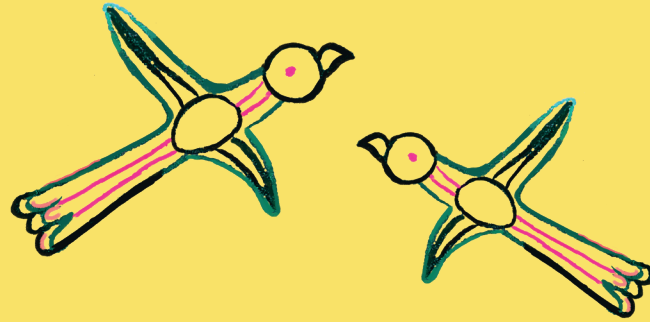
But the government was not interested in planting trees that were useful to us or the wildlife. They wanted to plant only those trees whose timber could be used for their needs. So they began to plant trees like teak and pine in place of naturally growing trees that were being cut down.

Question: Teak or mango - Which should have been planted? Why?



Kunjan in Trouble

Sangeetha

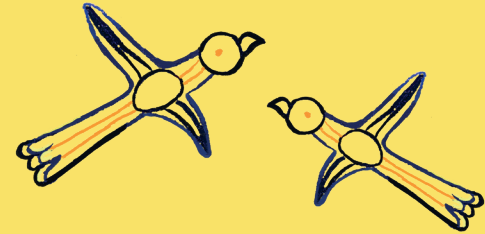


Kunjan was on his way back to his village from the forest. He was carrying a deer on his shoulder that he had just killed for the annual harvest festival. His family would cook the deer which would be enough for the whole village. Suddenly he saw the forest guard coming towards him. He waited for the guard to come closer and greeted him.

"Hello sir, how is everything in the forest?"

"Everything is alright. But what do you think you are doing here with the deer?", asked the guard.

"Sir, we have our harvest festival tomorrow. The deer is for the festival. We are planning a feast. You should also come."



Guard: "Have you not heard that there is a heavy fine for hunting in the forest?" Kunjan: "I am sorry I didn't know, sir. I will tell everyone. We will not do it in future." Guard: "You can't just walk away like that. If I let you go, I will lose my job. You have to pay the fine now."

The forest guard pulled out a small book from his pocket, handed Kunjan a piece of paper and said, "100 rupees for hunting the deer! And leave the deer right here."

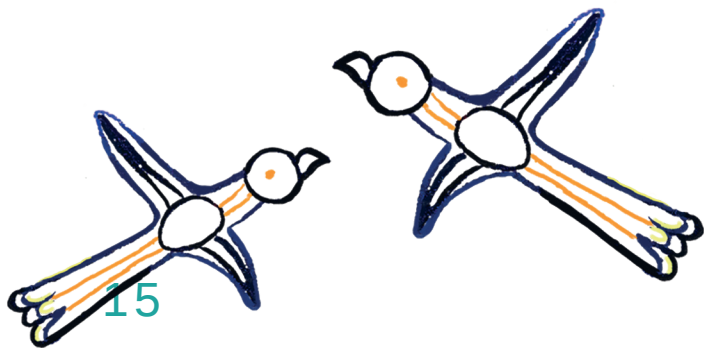
Kunjan dropped the deer and said, "Sir, I don't have any money on me now."

"Keep this paper. I will come to your village tomorrow and collect it."

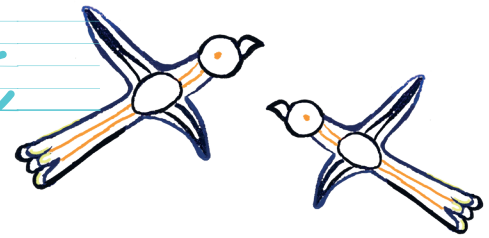
Kunjan walked back to his village sadly.

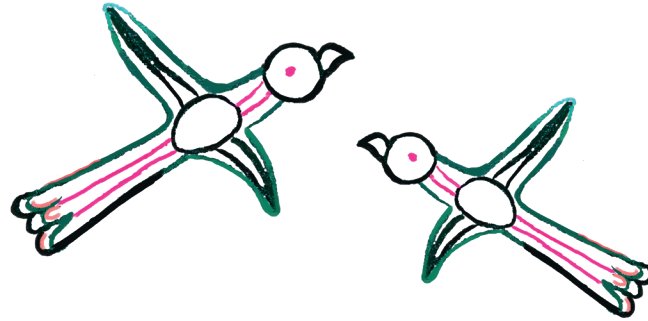


The Forest Department passed new laws to stop us from using the forests freely. With these rules and laws, we lost our forest, our home. We were no longer free to use bamboo for our roofs and walls, graze cattle, gather flowers, tubers and fruit or hunt in the forests. The Forest Department said that we had destroyed the forest. They felt that the forests had to be protected from us.



The Forest
Department

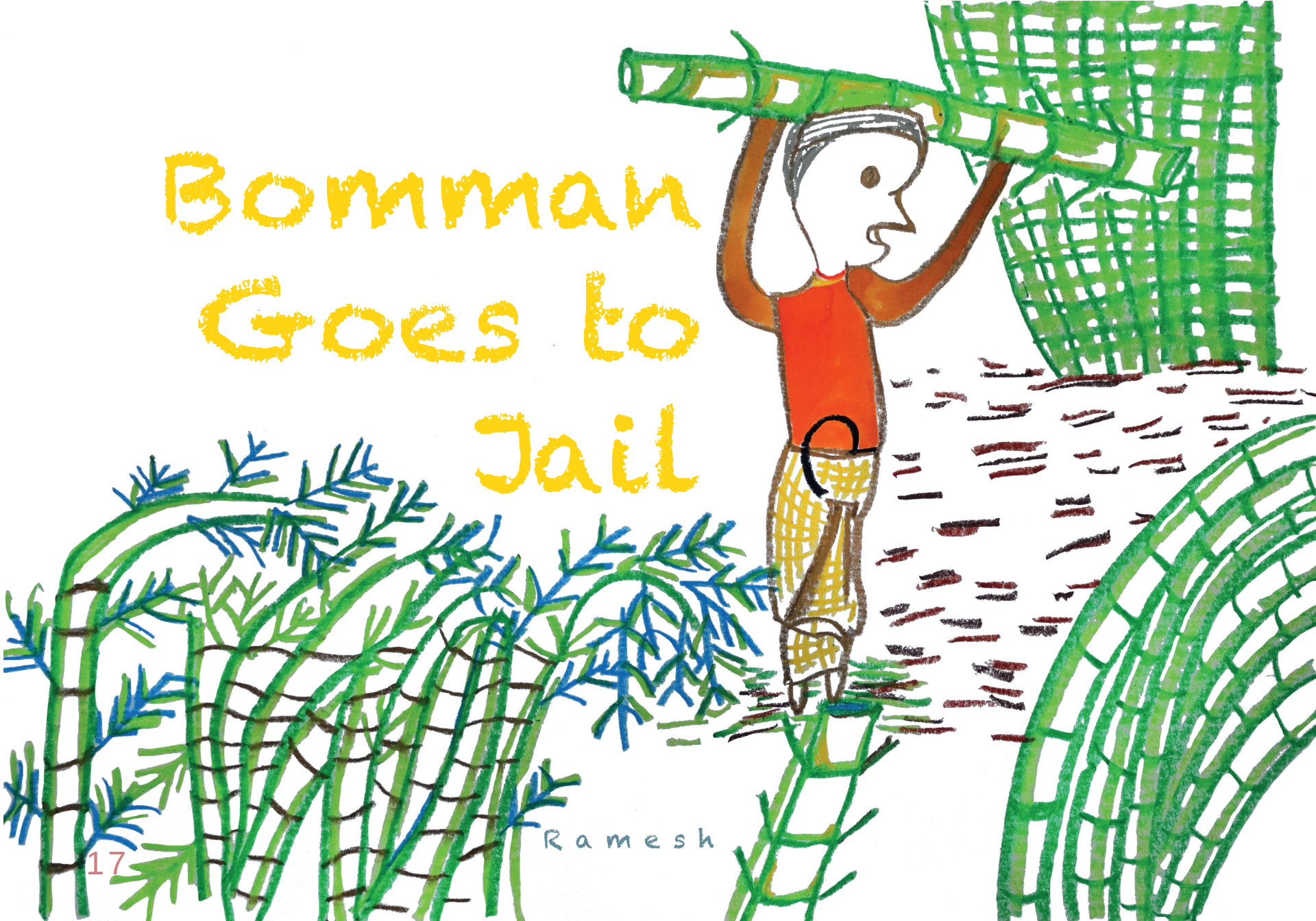




As time passed, the rules became stricter. We were not allowed to collect anything from the forest. The Forest Department would arrest us and put us in jail. Our crops would be destroyed without any notice. The forest officials would snatch our knives if they found us in the forest. We started to live in fear of them.



Bommam Goes to Jail



Ramesh



Monsoons were approaching and Bomman's house needed to be repaired. His family went into the forest to cut bamboo and thatch. As they were loading the bamboo onto their heads, the forest guard saw them and shouted, "So this is what you do in the forest. And you think I don't know! That too, you bring a knife into the forest. Give me that knife of yours!"

Bomman gave the knife to the guard and tried to explain the matter to him, "Sir, my house will not survive the monsoons. I have only cut what I need to repair my roof".

"Who gave you the permission?", the guard asked.

"Sir, we will ask you the next time. Please let it go this time."



"You think you can just walk into the forest whenever you want to. Seven days in the jail is what you need. Only then will you learn your lesson. Come right now!"



Bibin



Kuno is a wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh which had different kinds of wild animals, but no lions. Adivasis had been living inside the sanctuary for many generations. They grew paddy, and gathered tubers, leaves and fruits from the forest. They worshipped their gods in the forest to provide them enough of everything.

Lions in Kuno



In the year 2000, the forest officials had an idea. "Gujarat has a surplus of lions in their forest. Why don't we bring a few lions into this sanctuary? If the adivasis leave the forest, there will be enough space for the lions."

They decided to bring 8 lions into Kuno from Gujarat.

They went to the adivasi villages and announced, "Lions are coming. You have two months' time to pack all your things and leave!"

"But what about our land and our crops?", asked Bagchi

"We will find some land where you can grow paddy."

"Will we be able to collect tubers and leaves there?"

"No. But there will be shops. You can buy rice and vegetables and all other things that you don't get in the forest."

"What about our gods? How can we leave them behind?"

"Take your gods with you."

"You have to make adjustments. You can adjust anywhere. But can the lions adjust? No!"

1500 adivasi families were made to leave their homes, their crops and their forest to make space for the lions. 15 years later, the lions have still not come!!

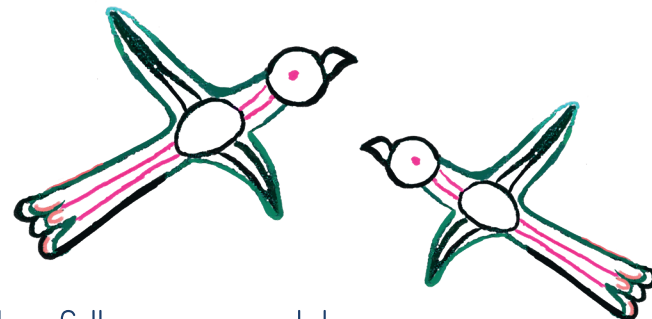


This injustice continued for many generations. In the year 2002, the government passed an order for removing the people who lived inside the forest. We were called encroachers. We had absolutely no rights in the forest. Many of us across India fought against this injustice.



We organized protests and strikes
to demand our rights in the forest. We met the
government officials and asked them to stop the
injustice. Finally in 2006, the Forest Rights Act
was passed.

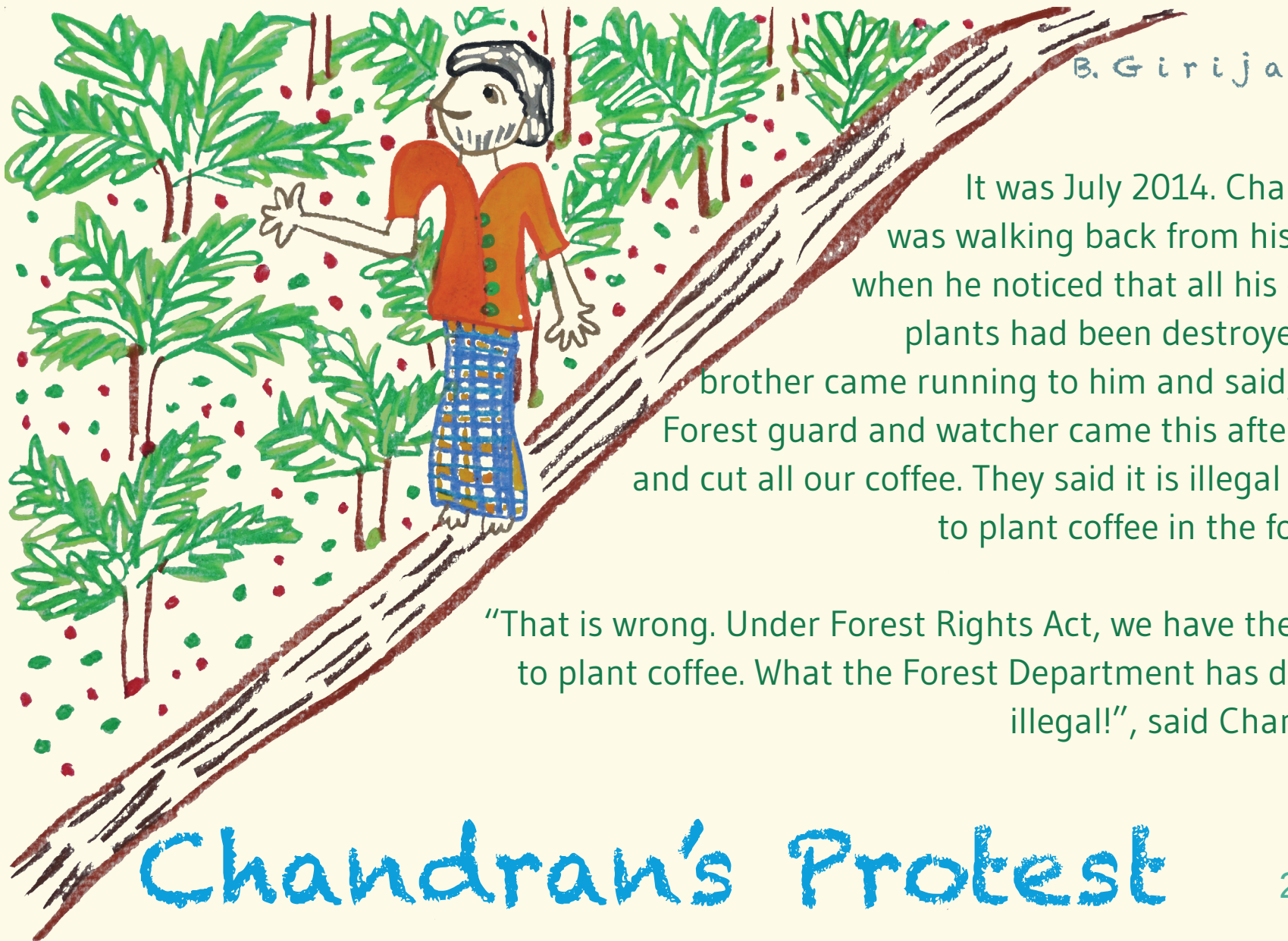




Under the Forest Rights Act, we have the following rights:

- ø We have the right to live in the forest.
 - ø The Forest Department cannot force us to leave the forest against our wish.
 - ø We can grow crops on land that we have been cultivating for generations.
 - ø Forest officials cannot touch our crops.
- (Condition: Under the Act, we cannot start cultivation on new land in the forest after 2005).





B. Girija

It was July 2014. Chandran was walking back from his work when he noticed that all his coffee plants had been destroyed. His brother came running to him and said, "The Forest guard and watcher came this afternoon and cut all our coffee. They said it is illegal for us to plant coffee in the forest."

"That is wrong. Under Forest Rights Act, we have the right to plant coffee. What the Forest Department has done is illegal!", said Chandran.

Chandran's Protest

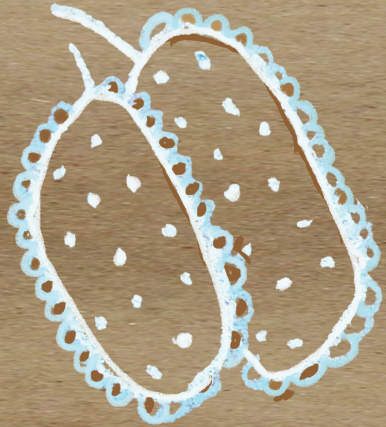




Together with people from his village, Chandran went to the forest office and demanded an explanation from the forest officials. The forest officials did not bother to respond. Chandran filed a case against the forest guard and watcher. The very next day, the forest officials came to his village and said, “We made a mistake. We will never do such a thing in future. Please take back your case.”

“We will not withdraw the case back. Do whatever you want.”





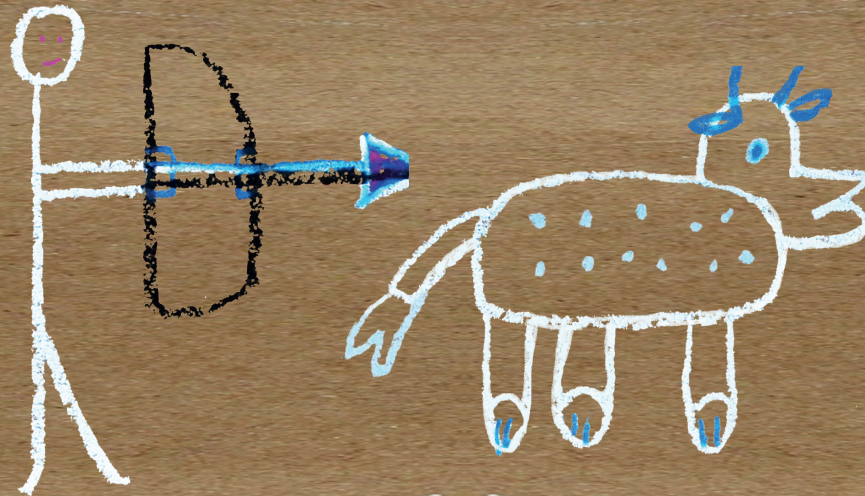
☒ We have the right to collect and sell, dry wood, bamboo, medicinal plants, fruits, etc from the forest. We do not need anyone's permission.
(Exception: We cannot hunt or cut trees in the forest.)



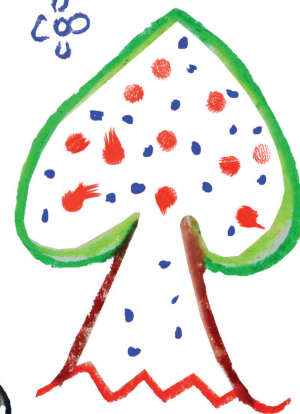
- ☒ We have the right to use rivers, streams and ponds inside the forest, collect fish and crabs from them for our food.
- ☒ We have the right to use our sacred groves and burial grounds inside the forest. The Forest Department cannot stop us.
- ☒ We have the right to protect our forest. The Forest Department cannot plan any activity inside the Forest without our permission.

Question: A group of five adivasis have gone into the forest to collect 'nellikai'. They see the Forest guard and watcher coming. What should they do?

- a) Run and hide
- b) Pay 200 rupees to the forest guard to allow them to collect 'nellikai'
- c) Continue to collect 'nellikai' fearlessly



Ghati Protects its Forest



Asha



Ghati is a small village inside a forest in Maharashtra. The forest officials in Ghati would cut hundreds of trees every year and sell the wood to factories. The people of Ghati were sad because less trees meant less fruits and flowers. But they could not stop the Forest Department. Now the situation had changed because of the Forest Rights Act.

The Ghati villagers learnt that they had the right to stop any activity in the forest which was destroying their forest. When the forest officials came again to cut the trees, the villagers protested.

“You cannot cut these trees. All these years, we have lost many useful trees from all the felling you have done”, the villagers said.

“Oh, so now you people will tell us what we can do in the forest!”, asked a forest official.



"Yes we will. We have the same right as you to protect our forest. Have you not read the Forest Rights Act? You have to take our permission before doing anything in our forest."

The forest officials could not cut the trees. The villagers also imposed a fine on the company that was going to buy the wood.



ø We have the right to plant herbs, trees, tubers and other plants that we want in the forest and take care of them.

(Condition: We should plant only such plants that grows naturally in the forest.)

ø Knowledge of the forest is something we own. We have the right to protect this knowledge. No one can use our knowledge without our permission.

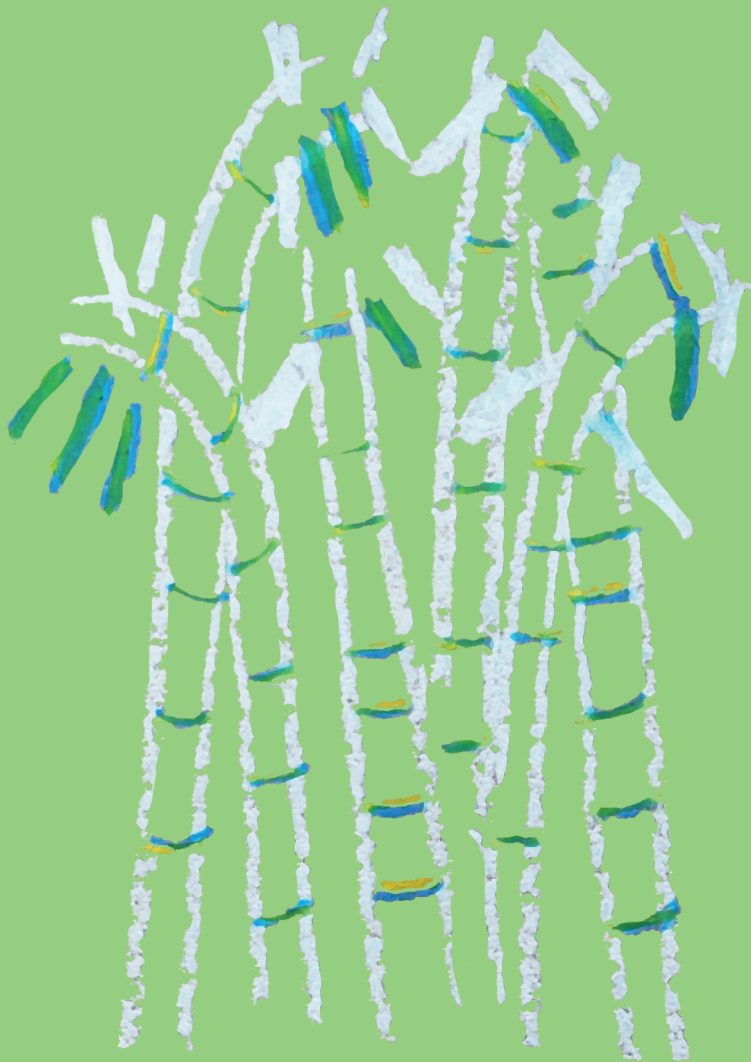
Question: Banana or 'naaval'– Which tree can you plant?



The **Adivasi Munnetra Sangam** in Gudalur, is an organisation of Adivasi people working on their rights in the region. Led by pivotal 'animators', leaders in each village or locality, the organisation was first set up in a struggle for ownership of land. Over the years, it has evolved to address a multitude of issues faced by the people in the preservation of their way of life.

ACCORD (Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development) is an NGO that has been working closely with the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam for over 30 years, over issues of Adivasi rights, health, education, housing and culture. Together they work towards sustenance of the Adivasi way within the changing contexts of today's world. For more information on ACCORD or AMS, please visit www.adivasi.net





VBVT (Viswa Bharati Vidyodaya Trust), is the educational endeavour of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam, set up with the aim of improving education opportunities for Adivasi children in the early 90's. One of the initiatives of VBVT, Vidyodaya School at Gudalur, has been a vibrant and inspirational space for Adivasi students and parents. The schools outreach includes surrounding Adivasi villages and reaches a few thousand Adivasi children, both directly through Balavadis and Libraries as well as through Government Tribal Schools. VBVT also works with young school drop-outs as a bridge and rehabilitation space through the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan Residential School and the Foundation Course”

The Gudalur region, in the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, is home to 4 main Adivasi groups - the Mullakurumbas, Bettakurumbas, Katunayakans and Paniyas. The children who have illustrated these pages represent all four tribes.

For more information on VBVT or Vidyodaya School, please visit www.vidyodaya.org/www.adivasi.net.

